

La Lucha Sigue: Liberatory Education in Indigenous Guatemala

By Piper Strzelecki

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Gregory McClure, PhD, Thesis Director

Timothy Smith, PhD, Second Reader

Jon Carter, PhD, Third Reader

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the people of Copal AA, who have shown me that the struggle for social justice never ends. *La lucha sigue, pero el color cambia.*

Abstract

The rural community of Copal AA was formed when the first group of Guatemalans returned from Mexico after the internal armed conflict (CA) ended in 1996. This is a multiethnic, multilingual community composed of indigenous Mayan people. It is important to note that while the CA itself was not a genocide, the UN Historical Clarification Commission found that genocide was committed against the indigenous populations of Guatemala from 1981 to 1983. In Copal AA, the middle school, *El Instituto Basico Nuevo Amanecer* (IBNA) explores Freirian-based approaches to education in an effort to reach critical consciousness about the social, political, and economic problems facing their community. I visited Copal AA during March 2020 with an Honors seminar at Appalachian State University. Through interviews, fieldnotes, and archived photos and videos, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the teaching practices at IBNA. I have explored their use of popular education, praxis, and democratic student-teacher relationships in order to encourage their students to question the current state of their country. Through this research, I was able to question the methods of teaching that I have experienced as a middle class, White, United States citizen and how they do not contribute to furthering social justice.

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I can not fully express my gratitude for Dr. Greg McClure, without whom this thesis would most certainly not exist. Dr. McClure warmly invited me to weave myself into the story of Copal AA and has guided me every step of the way up to the completion of this thesis. Even though I'm sure it felt like pulling teeth at some times, Dr. McClure has been patient with me through every meeting, email, phone call, form, question, mistake, and triumph. Dr. McClure always took my suggestions seriously and made me feel like a peer when I provided feedback, which had a profound impact on forming my self-confidence, inside and outside of the classroom. I have known Dr. McClure since Fall of 2018 and since then, he has had a profound impact on my relationship to learning, understanding of the world, and sense of self. He has always encouraged my thinking with questions, rather than answers. He has exemplified enthusiasm for knowledge and the idea that you need to figure things out for yourself, rather than passively believing what someone tells you. He has retained a unique combination of endless passion, patience, light-heartedness, and curiosity, no matter the circumstances. I have been extremely fortunate to work with Dr. McClure and any student that crosses his path should consider themselves lucky.

I would like to thank Dr. Jon Carter, without whom I may have never decided to study Anthropology. I enrolled in Latin America Through Ethnography for no particular reason, other than the fact that I was possibly interested in Global Studies. However, after brilliant classes about the spirituality of guinea pigs, the knowledge of shamans, the chaos of U.S. economic policy, and the hierarchy of sources of knowledge, I knew that Anthropology was for me. No matter what was going on in the world or in his own life, he was always a source of calmness

and wisdom. Dr. Carter has been an enormous source of inspiration and encouragement for me during my time as an undergraduate student.

I am also grateful to Dr. Timothy Smith. Without many of his publications, this research project would not have been possible. Thanks to Dr. Smith's tireless years of fieldwork and academic research, the story of the Guatemalan people is accessible to a much wider audience. Dr. Smith has served as the department chair for the academic apartment which has helped me find my purpose in the world.

I am deeply thankful for Dr. Dane and Jenny Ward, who provided the funding for this thesis. Without their generous support, this project would have been incomplete.

I am immensely thankful to my Mom, Dad, and younger brother for being willing to listen to my long-winded speeches about this thesis. I could call at any time and you all would still be willing to help me think through my ideas. Even when I pasted excerpts of my thesis all over the walls like a serial killer, you still supported me which I am grateful for.

Finally, I can not fully express my gratitude to my partner, Stephen, who never once complained when I talked about my thesis. Whether I was on the phone for hours, typing away while you tried to sleep, leaving our conversation for a sudden breakthrough, or forcing you to listen to my Spanish, you were always supportive.

Introduction

As soon as the image came into focus, all the sensations rushed back to me. I'm on a Zoom call, looking at a laptop-sized square of the Guatemalan highlands, yet I can still see the luscious green grass covering the rolling hills. I can still hear the notes of the marimba mingling with the calls of the roosters. I can feel the cool breeze of the Rio Chixoy, smell the freshly turned dirt in the gardens, and taste the homemade corn tortillas. On the other end of the Zoom call is Mateo¹, the director of the school in the community of Copal AA La Esperanza². During an interview in December 2020, he described the effects of back-to-back hurricanes which had hit Guatemala in the past two weeks.

El río Chixoy, el río Copal AA también asustó bastante porque sí creció muchísimo. Sí. Tuve que salir, tuve que salir de la casa donde vivo porque el agua llegó y bueno, y algunas familias también tuvieron que salir. Causó mucho problema cuanto lo que la carretera. Hubieron inundaciones, o sea que hundimiento de carretera de tierra a río abajo, pues también afectó muchísimo. Muchas comunidades se quedaron así también de verdad, incomunicados, pues hasta ahorita poco a poco se está como ya volviendo a recuperar a la normalidad.

The Chixoy River, the Copal AA River also frightened us quite a lot because it rose very much. Yes. I had to leave, I had to leave from my house because the water came and well, some families also had to leave. It caused problems in the road. There were floods, the flooding from the river to the land, also affected us a lot. Many communities remained this way, without communication, so now little by little things are going back to normal.

¹ All names in this paper are pseudonyms

² A Spanish and indigenous Mayan name which means “water” and “hope”

Dealing with the effects of global climate change is part of the daily routine in Copal AA, a rural Maya community just outside the Ixcán jungle in Guatemala. In this case, volatile weather had forced some families to leave their homes as the nearby rivers flooded the land. As Mateo talked, in my mind I could see the community hard at work, neighbors helping one another remove clothing, furniture, and other belongings from flooded homes. In addition to the increasing challenges posed by climate change, the Copalenses continue to struggle for economic, political, and social justice. Theirs is a country plagued by poverty, corruption, violence, and the lasting legacy of a civil war, the *conflicto armado* (CA), that targeted the country's indigenous Maya population from 1960-1996. The UN-sponsored Historical Clarification Commission found that over 200,000 people were killed in this civil war. 83% of the victims were indigenous Mayan and 93% of the violations were committed by state military forces (Tomuschat et. al, 1999). This Commission also concluded that while the CA itself was not a genocide, that acts of genocide were committed against the Mayan people in Guatemala. They wrote,

The CEH concludes that agents of the State of Guatemala, within the framework of counterinsurgency operations carried out between 1981 and 1983, committed acts of genocide against groups of Mayan people which lived in the four regions³ analysed (Tomuschat et. al, 1999, 39)

After a political conflict that disproportionately affected the indigenous communities of Guatemala, the events of the CA are deeply embedded in the current struggles faced by the Mayan communities of this nation. This thesis will describe the community of Copal AA in

³ Maya-Q'anjob'al and Maya-Chuj, in Barillas, Nenton and San Mateo Ixtatan in North Huehuetenango; Maya-Ixil, in Nebaj, Cotzal and Chajul, Quiche; Maya-K'iche' in Joyabaj, Zacualpa and Chiche, Quiche; and Maya-Achi in Rabinal, Baja Verapaz

context with recent Guatemalan history. In Copal AA, there is a middle school, *El Instituto Basico Nuevo Amanecer* (IBNA). This school uses Frerian (1993) approaches to education as a way to be aware of the problems facing their community such as lack of clean water, environmental destruction, natural disasters, and neglect from the national government. The teachers at IBNA challenge their students to question why their community is suffering from these challenges and what they can do to liberate themselves. This paper will explore my observations from Copal AA, along with interviews I conducted in Fall 2020. Interwoven with my academic research, I have included a chronological account of my time in Copal AA, based on my field notes from my visit in March 2020. In Copala AA, I came to recognize the value of individuals and community stories as important sources of knowledge. These interludes are included to follow IBNA's example of valuing personal stories and to supplement my research with first hand experiences. They are each labelled with a Spanish title.

I visited the community of Copal AA in March of 2020 as a course assistant for the Honors seminar "Education, Liberation, and Sustainability in Indigenous Guatemala". While I was in Copal AA, I observed education used to reach a level of deeper understanding of current social issues. I saw the success of collective work, where community members contribute for the well-being of their neighbors. I noticed immense environmental consciousness and the Earth being cared for as a living, breathing thing. Since departing from Copal AA, the advice of their community leaders have been stuck in my head: "tell our story". So, I continue the chronicle of Copal AA.

Un calurosa bienvenida



The main path which winds through Copal AA (photo by author)

After a journey from the airport, made worrisome by the start of Coronavirus, we arrived in Coban, the last large city in the vicinity of Copal AA. After a breakfast of eggs, black beans, and corn tortillas, we packed into the bus and zoomed through the jungle. On each side of me, plants which I could never identify whizzed by. The air grew thicker by the minute. You could not drive 10 minutes without spotting a poster declaring “No queremos el megaproyecto” or “Resistamos la represa”. We do not want the megaproject. We resist the dam. Each community had some variation of these phrases attached to their welcoming sign.

We continued our welcome with a walk around the community. A member of the COCODE showed us the central market, community offices, the technology center, the primary school, IBNA, and the Evangelical and Catholic churches. Copal AA is outlined by the Copala River and the Rio Chixoy, which are both vital to the community's survival. We were told about the use of solar energy to power the school offices and the community kitchen. As our feet crunched along the gravel road, we parted ways to spend the evening with our host families.

My classmate, B and I winded our way back to our host family: a mother and father with a teenage boy and two small children. Our host father had been on a speaking tour in the U.S. as part of an initiative with the Solidarity Collective. He sat with us as we munched on rice and beans, excitedly listing the states that he had visited and the colleges he had spoken at. As the sun set, B and I made our way into the room where we would be staying. We squished ourselves under a shared bug net and said goodnight at 8 o'clock. I fell asleep to the sound of light rain on the metal roof.



Our first steps in Copal AA; the community-constructed salon which hosts performances, markets, and games (photo by author)

Purpose

This thesis will explore the practices and philosophies of IBNA, the middle school in Copal AA. I will delve into Freirian approaches to education and discuss IBNA's liberatory approach to education and pedagogy (Freire, 1993). My hope is to gain a deeper understanding of how Freirian practices are utilized to gain liberation from oppressive power structures and to provide the freedom of self-determination. As someone who was educated in a traditional public school setting in the United States, I have come to realize how easily education can be seen as something which is "given" by the teachers and "received" by the students, what Freire referred to as "the banking method of education" (1993). Instead, education can be a democratic process which is informed by the realities of people in the community. This thesis is meant to illuminate the benefits of liberatory education and how IBNA is utilizing these practices to fight for autonomy from poverty, government historical narratives, and exploitation of resources.

My intention is to tell the stories of the people of Copal AA, specifically the revolutionary education taking place in the community and how it is interwoven with the history of state-organized violence. While Copal AA is one unique community, they are certainly not the only group that has needed to rebuild themselves after a political war. The practices of IBNA are meant to be one example of how survivors of ethnic violence retell and relate to their country's history. Furthermore, the relationship between IBNA and the Guatemalan government demonstrates the damaging effects of what happens when a society is divided on the events of the past. The teachers and students at IBNA constantly have to confront and negotiate between localized, community knowledge and sanitized, state curricula that glosses over the realities of the CA and ongoing struggle in indigenous communities, as documented in much of the literature on indigenous schooling in Guatemala (Bellino, 2017; Rubin, 2016, 2019).

My transformative experience as a visitor to Copal AA is the impetus for this project. The field notes from my visit in March 2020 provide the details for descriptions of people, places, and events that I mention in this thesis. Additionally, my experience as a participant-observer (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011) during my brief visit helped shape my thinking about this project and informed the interviews I conducted in the Fall of 2020 . Along with my own field notes, I examined existing scholarship on Guatemalan history and the conflict armado (Falla 1994; Schlesinger 1999; Manz 2004; Smith and Adams 2011) and education (Bellino 2017, Falla 1994; Rubin 2016, 2019). This was supplemented by archived writings, photographs, and videos from Copal AA.

This community has had a substantial impact on my understanding of the world and what it means to have a hand in forming your own education. I began to grasp how much power I hold in the world as a middle-class, White, educated person from the United States. My goal is to share the story of Copal AA, so that it may inspire others to question their own experiences with education. As this thesis will demonstrate, IBNA refuses to be silent on the atrocities committed by the state during the CA and encourages their students to question the causes of current problems in the community. The ideas guiding this thesis come from theories surrounding liberatory education and how the classroom can provide a basis for grassroots social change. Specifically, this thesis is informed by Freirian approaches to education, in particular, his contributions to problem-posing education and education as liberation (Freire, 1993). This thesis is meant to act as a platform for the stories I heard at IBNA and why the philosophies surrounding education in Copal AA have global implications.

Historical Context

Guatemala is a nation of approximately 11 million people. It is the most populous country in Central America and has the highest population growth in all of Latin America (United Nations Population Division, 2021). As reported by Minority Rights Group International, more than 40% of the country are indigenous, belonging to one of 24 different Maya groups (Minority Rights Group, 2021). However, according to indigenous representatives, the figure is closer to 60%. Q'eqchi' is the most commonly spoken indigenous language throughout the country. The indigenous languages present in Copal AA are Q'eqchi', Mam, and Q'anjob'al. While much of the country is plagued by poverty, economic insecurity particularly affects the nation's indigenous, with more than 79% of the indigenous population living in poverty and 40% living in extreme poverty. Copal AA is no exception to this rule; the residents live without consistent electricity, running water, or plumbing.

Many of the challenges facing Guatemala today can be traced to an exploitative relationship with the United States, similar to many nations in Latin America (Galeono, 1997; LaFeber, 1983). At the turn of the 20th century, the United States' owned United Fruit Company (UFCO) began exporting bananas from Guatemala, which allowed them to take more and more of the country's resources (Schlesinger, 1999). Guatemala came under an increasingly strong grip from U.S. economic policies, and during the time of the dictatorship of Jorge Ubico in the 1950's, the UFCO owned 42% of Guatemala's land (Schlesinger, 1999).

As more and more land came to be owned by less and less individuals, Guatemalans became increasingly upset with their current reality and began organizing. The October Revolution of 1944 was the height of this tension. President Jorge Ubico was forced to resign by

a movement led by university students and labor organizers, but he immediately assigned a military junta to take his place (Smith and Adams, 2011). Ubico's oppressive policies continued until this movement grew and gained the support of teachers and even parts of the army. The military junta installed by Ubico was forced to flee the country and in December of 1944, President Juan Jose Alvero was democratically elected (Smith and Adams, 2011). The period of his presidency and Arturo Arbenz Guzman's presidency is known as the 10 Years of Spring, which is named because it was a time of immense social, political, and economic reform (Smith and Adams, 2011).

When President Arbenz took office in 1951, he was set on reforming the immense economic inequality which existed in Guatemala. At this time, only 2% of the Guatemalan population owned 72% of the land (Office of the Historian, 2021). On June 17, 1952, Decree 900 was passed in the Guatemalan National Assembly. This law mandated the government purchase of large excesses of land with compensation based on 1951 tax forms. Naturally, this enraged the wealthy landowners of Guatemala, along with the UFCO, who would be forced to relinquish over 400,000 acres of land (Schlesinger, 1999). Although the government was compensating the former owners for the land, the United Fruit Company felt that they had been robbed of their assets and decided to turn to the newly-formed American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). President Arbenz had been subject to a watchful eye from the United States because of his left-leaning views. At a time when American capitalism was perceived to be under attack, the CIA did not take this agrarian reform lightly. The United States Office of the Historian explains,

The social unrest that accompanied the passage and implementation of the Agrarian Reform Law supplied critics in Guatemala and Washington with confirmation that a Communist beachhead had been established in the Americas. Agrarian reform was not

the issue—communism was. Action had to be taken before it was too late. (Office of the Historian, 2021)

In 1954, with the help of U.S. forces, there was a military coup of the Guatemalan government. This American intervention led to years of military dictatorships and a civil war which included genocide of the country's indigenous population. 100,000 Guatemalans were forced to seek refuge in Mexico during the CA (Armon, 1997). However, the Mayan population was disproportionately affected by the war: 83% percent of all human rights abuses were suffered by indigenous Mayans (Tomuschat et. al, 1999). According to Manz (2004), approximately 46,000 Guatemalan refugees lived in camps constructed by the United Nations. Some of these victims sought refugee status in the United States and Mexico as an asylum for political or ethnic persecution. As reported by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, the first wave of 50,000 Guatemalans who had fled to Mexico returned in early 1993 (Hiram, 1993). Those who came back in the first wave were known as *los retornados* and they established a community called *La Victoria 20 de enero* to mark the date of their return to Guatemala. As land and resources in *La Victoria* became scarce, a group of 86 families began searching for land to begin a new community. This group of families would become the founding families of Copal AA La Esperanza (Boeykens, 2019).

Copal AA La Esperanza

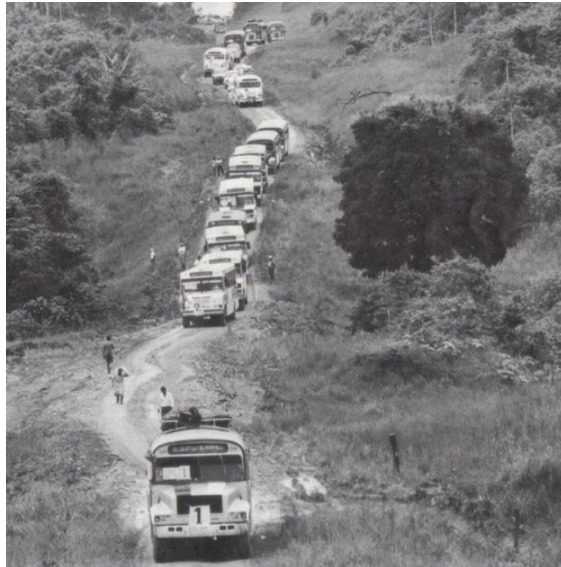


Photo of first Guatemalan refugees returning from Mexico (NISGUA, 2021)

Copal AA La Esperanza is a rural community located in the Alta Verapaz department of Guatemala, approximately 45 miles from the Mexican border. Copal AA is situated between the Rio Chixoy and Copala River, an area which was occupied by the army during the war. The community was established by 86 families in January of 1996, and has since grown to about 700 residents. Copal AA is multilingual and multiethnic. The Copalenses are from the Mam, Q'anjob'al and Q'eqchi' indigenous Mayan ethnic groups, each with their respective languages and cultural practices. Many of the residents also speak Spanish, but this is less common among women and older community members. No matter which branch of Mayan identity someone identifies with, there is a celebration of indigeneity among the residents of Copal AA. Q'eqchi is taught at IBNA, Mayan dances are often performed at community or regional events, and traditional Mayan clothing, *traje*, is commonly worn and made in Copal AA. From the beginning, Copal AA established a progressive vision for their community, adopting by-laws that

banned the use of slash and burn agriculture, chemical pesticides and fertilizers, and sale of junk food and alcohol.



Mam huipil as worn by a member of Copal AA (Goodman, 2020)

These community decisions reflect Copal AA's perspectives that see people as intimately connected with the Earth. This is one of the community's core values. The rural placement of Copal AA is well-suited for small scale farming. The community relies mainly on cardamom, but also coffee to support themselves. There is an immense focus on environmental consciousness in Copal AA, even as the effects of global climate change fight back. During a meeting, one of the community leaders described the jungle as "*los pulmones de la comunidad*". The lungs; something that is living, breathing, and essential to survival. One way these values are passed down to younger generations is through Copal AA's approach to education.

However, it is important to note that Copal AA has been dedicated to using education as a tool for liberation since before the community was officially created. During the most violent years of the civil war, hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans fled to refugee camps in Mexico. These refugees were people of various indigenous Mayan ethnic groups, who worked together to organize schooling for the refugee children and to lay the groundwork for their return to Guatemala. Anthropologist Ricardo Falla observed the importance of community life during his fieldwork in Mexico. He noted that community life was integral for refugees who aimed to form a new society upon returning to Guatemala. Falla explains,

Although the refugees had experienced community life before leaving for Mexico, both as indigenous communities in the Guatemalan highlands and as cooperatives in the jungle, in exile this experience has become more vast and deep-rooted. The refugees have learned to use the scarce power they have for...negotiating with authorities, seeking delay mechanisms, showing willingness to compromise, denouncing injustice, [and] resisting forced relocation. (1992, 177)

It is also important to note that the cultural separation of the various sectors of indigenous Mayans has been encouraged by the ruling class of Guatemala for hundreds of years. Despite suffering from the same methods of oppression at the hands of the government, there has been a sense of disunion between various subsets of the indigenous population. Through cultural separation and physical, it was more difficult for the entire Mayan population to realize they were suffering from similar patterns of oppression. Thus, when refugees came from all over Guatemala to seek refuge in Mexico, they were able to gain a more collective sense of indigenous identity. This in turn contributed to a sense of wanting to improve their social standing. One of the organizations that formed in the refugee camps was Mama Maquin, a

women's organization. Some of the residents of Copal AA still belong to this organization decades later. In *Voices of Exile*, Victor Montejo describes it in greater detail,

So women created Mama Maquin to address education, skill training, literacy, and leadership training. Led by the more political women refugees and aided by a number of international solidarity organizations, Mama Maquin attempted to reach all refugee women through camp meetings and camp representatives (1999, 193)

During my visit to Copal AA in March of last year, I spent my first morning at IBNA. The rainy season had been unusually long that year thanks to global climate change, so our boots were caked in fresh mud when we arrived at the entrance. After crossing a slippery wooden bridge, we made our way up the hill to the classrooms. El Instituto consists of 3 classrooms, a basketball court, and a community garden. The concrete classrooms are lined with well-worn wooden desks all facing towards a whiteboard. A few hundred yards away from the classrooms are two wooden outhouses outfitted with a hole in the floor and small rolls of crumpled toilet paper. During my time at IBNA and through interviews with the teachers, I observed that they teach a more inclusive history of the genocide of the Mayan population during the CA, and the continuing indigenous struggle for environmental, political, and economic justice using theories of liberatory education. In the following section, I discuss several key aspects of liberatory education which are all utilized at IBNA to increase students' awareness of current social justice issues in Copal AA.

Liberatory Education

The teaching approaches at IBNA draw directly from Paulo Freire's profound work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In this book, he analyzes traditional methods of teaching and how they are hindering the liberation of oppressed groups. Freire's intellectual ideas stem from Marxist theories of class analysis. Marx recognized that capitalistic society functions through the existence of a ruling class (the bourgeois) and a working class (the proletariat) (Lake and Kress, 2004). This class structure is maintained by what Marx calls "false consciousness", which happens when the working class is unaware of or unbothered by the ideologies which are holding them down. They follow rules and societal norms which are contributing to their oppression without either the desire or knowledge required to change their situation. Freire's concept of critical consciousness encourages the working class to reach a heightened state awareness towards the political systems which are keeping them at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder (Lake and Kress, 2004). Another aspect of Marxism which Freire was inspired by was teaching history as the impetus of social transformation. While Marx critiqued the education systems that he observed, Freire offered an alternative pedagogy.

Traditional public schools often use what Freire labelled as the banking concept of education, in which students are empty vessels to be filled with information by the teacher (Freire, 1993). The students prime tasks are to "receive, memorize, and repeat" (Freire, 1993, 58). In this system, the teacher talks while the students listen, the teacher knows all while the students know nothing, and the teacher makes decisions while the students mindlessly comply. One alternative practice is problem-posing education. This type of teaching encourages students to actively think and act upon their world. Problem-posing education is characterized by critical consciousness, democratic teacher-student relationships, collective praxis, and a curriculum

grounded in students experiences and interests. The teaching approaches at IBNA resist banking methods of schooling in favor of problem-posing education. Freire elaborates on the differences between these two philosophies,

[Banking education] attempts, by mythicizing reality, to conceal certain facts which explain the way men exist in the world.... Banking education resists dialogue; problem-posing education regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality. Banking education treats students as objects of assistance; problem-posing education makes them critical thinkers.... Problem-posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of men as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation. (Freire, 1993, 83-84)

Additionally, problem-posing education is meant to be inclusive for people of varying levels of education and often incorporates non-traditional methods of learning such as music, theater, poetry, and other art forms. These methods of expression are meant to combat what Freire called a culture of silence, which refers to colonizing entities that oppress the voices of marginalized populations. The unconventional practices of popular education serve to give a voice to those who have been silenced. Thus, art, music, and theater are valuable not just as tools of cultural expression, but also as means to share wisdom and strengthen a community. Often, theater is utilized at IBNA to share knowledge with the whole community of Copal AA.

One key component of problem-posing education is that there is no single authoritarian figure, but instead there is a democratic student-teacher relationship. In this case, everyone has the opportunity to teach and to learn. Knowledge is not owned by one group then given to the others. Instead, a teacher may act as a mediator and encouraging force for dialogue. The learning

process is based on the personal experiences of the participants. Thus, discussion centers around topics which are relevant to that specific community. These individual stories are meant to bond the participants together and to illuminate common problems so that action can be taken. In the interviews with IBNA teachers, there was a constant emphasis on encouraging the students to talk with their friends, family, and neighbors about the things they were learning, and especially to listen to their elders' experiences about the CA.

Conscientização, which is known as “critical consciousness” or “consciousness raising” in English, means “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 1993, 35). Freire tells us that groups who are oppressed politically, economically, or socially must take action against the oppressive elements of their reality. Critical consciousness is developed by seeing and reflecting on the structures of inequality in order to take action against these oppressive systems. If the masses are unable to recognize the power systems they are being exploited by, then they will never be able to free themselves. The first step to achieving this liberation is to see and acknowledge the inequality in the society you are living in. Without liberatory approaches to teaching, systems of inequality are never brought to attention or challenged. Freire explains, “As long as the oppressed remain unaware of the causes of their condition, they fatalistically accept their exploitation” (1993, 46)

As will be demonstrated later, the class activities at IBNA are structured in a way that does not hide current political issues from students, but instead encourages them to explore the causes of what is happening in the world and in the community of Copal AA. They urge their students to ask questions such as, “Why did the Conflict Armado take place?”, “Why does Copal AA suffer from a lack of resources?” and to consider how these themes are all connected.

Another component to successful problem-posing education is the idea of praxis. According to Freire, praxis is the cycle of reflection and action in order to positively change the world (Freire, 1993). Importantly, this is an action involving a continuous cycle of theory, application, and reflection. Without action, there are only empty words. Yet, without reflection, there is only mindless action. Although Freire sees dialogue as an essential tool for liberation, it is not the final solution. Thus, praxis combines action and reflection to initiate social transformation. An example of this would be the community garden at IBNA, which is used to teach students about environmental sustainability. After introducing the topic of global climate change, the students are able to practice sustainable agriculture in the community garden. The produce from this garden is sold by students and teachers in a market in the *salon* of Copal AA. The profits of these sales go directly back to IBNA.



'Salon' in Copal AA used for performances, markets, and community meetings (photo by author)

To conclude, Freire's ideas surrounding education are meant to empower marginalized groups which have not been given a platform to express the problems in their communities.

Everyone acts as a teacher and a student. The learning starts by talking about personal experiences, then finding commonalities. By hearing the experiences of others, the members of the group can discover broader understandings of the social structures in their society. This is meant to lead to direct action and continued group reflection, in the form of praxis. IBNA utilizes Freirian approaches to engage their students in a deeper understanding of the problems facing their communities by rejecting banking methods of education.

As previously mentioned, the Guatemalan CA was devastating to the indigenous populations, both in lives lost and in ensuring that the upper class would maintain power in the country. The official Historical Clarification Commission concluded that the Guatemalan state was responsible for over 90% of the human rights violations committed during the CA from 1962-1996 (Tomuschat et. al, 1999). However, there is a division in the country over whether the state was actually responsible for this amount of the violence or whether the guerilla forces were more involved. In a comparative study looking at conflicting historical narratives in history, educators Rubin and Cervinkoa (2019) found interesting parallels between Poland and Guatemala. They use the term “state historical narratives” to reference government-constructed accounts of political conflict which are meant to gloss over incriminating details. These narratives create “official” versions of history which ignore details such as ethnic violence and refocus the story to create a sense of patriotism within the country (Rubin and Cervinkova, 2019). In the face of state historical narratives, historical memory can be either a tool or an obstacle for liberation in post-conflict societies. Rubin references Ana Maria Rodino saying,

[in countries that have experienced state terrorism]...the work of memory does not refer to keeping alive the memory of the glorious deeds of the past—which was the traditional approach to the history... Rather, the collective memory in these countries is understood

as the memory of egregious crimes that should never again (“nunca más”) be repeated. It is a memory not centered on heroes but on victims. (Rodino, 2017).

When considering the written accounts on the events of the CA, it is important to recognize that each of these are affected by the politics of knowledge and memory. Certain groups which produce knowledge hold more power than others. So, public knowledge is formed by the more powerful institutions and differing narratives may be left out. Two of the most comprehensive reports on the years of the CA are the Historical Clarification Commission’s “Memory of Silence” (Tomuschat et. al, 1999) and the Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala’s “Guatemala: Never Again!” (ODHAG, 1999) which will be referred to as the CEH and the REMHI, respectively. The comparison of these two reports is representative of the larger silencing of individual voices in Guatemala, as well as the continued failure to place blame for the violence. It is important to acknowledge that I have used information from both of these reports for this thesis. While the CEH may hold more power on an international scale, the REMHI report is more inclusive of the lived experiences of Guatemalan individuals during the years of the CA.

The CEH was a project created by the United Nations in conjunction with the Guatemalan government. Three people were tasked with completing this project: a German law professor, a Guatemalan lawyer, and an indigenous Mayan scholar. The official goal of the CEH was to clarify events of the past with "objectivity, equity and impartiality" (Tomuschat et. al, 1999). However, it is critical to realize the immense restrictions which were put on this investigation by the Guatemalan government. The CEH could not place blame on any individual, perpetrators of violence could not be named, the findings could have no judicial repercussions,

and the commission would only be given two years to complete their findings (Mersky, 2005).

The CEH has been highly criticized for contributing to the lack of accountability for the violence in Guatemala from 1960 to 1996. In contrast, the REMHI report was led by the Guatemalan Catholic Church. This project was written entirely by Guatemalans and relies on the testimony of their experiences, as opposed to numerical data. The interviews were conducted entirely by members of the church who were trained in the importance of preserving this history, along with the mental health implications of the participants having to relive these stories. The REMHI report also includes information from some of the perpetrators themselves. This was highly unusual, considering the violent repercussions that normally follow speaking out against the military. It is no surprise that many contributors to this project, including Archbishop Juan Gerardi, were allegedly killed for speaking out (Goldman, 2007).

In contrast to the government documents about the history of Guatemala from the 1950's to 1996, historical memory serves a different purpose. Historical memory is the use of polyvocal, collective stories from the past. Often, groups or even entire nations will identify with certain versions of the past. Of course, there is not always a consensus on the past and Guatemalan society is no exception to this. Today in Guatemala, there is division among the citizens about the severity of the violence during the CA, along with who should be considered responsible for it. Even as hundreds of indigenous survivors testified in court to convict former military dictators of genocide in national courts in 2013, many took to the streets to demonstrate in favor of the the *No hubo genocidio* movement (International Crisis Group, 2013). When dictator Rios Montt was not initially convicted of his human rights violations due to legal technicalities, this delegitimized the experiences of hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans. On May 10th, 2013,

Rios Montt was sentenced to 80 years in prison for the crime of genocide and crimes against humanity (International Crimes Database, 2013).

While many schools in Guatemala tread lightly around the topic of the genocide of the Mayan population from 1981 to 1983, IBNA is doing the opposite. In Copal AA, the community does not shy away from discussing what happened during the CA. On the contrary, students are encouraged to talk to their families and neighbors about their lived experiences during the 1980's. In *Youth in Postwar Guatemala*, anthropologist Michelle Bellino discovered that in many of the schools she visited, the CA was not a topic emphasized in the curriculum. She explains,

I noticed several tropes...First,--I would not find what I was looking for in the schools. If I wanted to know “the truth” about the violence, I should talk to adults who had “lived the war”. Over and over I heard from teachers and school leaders insistence that “we don’t talk about that here”. Some lamented that schools did not have resources with which to teach the violent past, because it was not included in the national curriculum, while others worried about the charged nature of teaching a past that continued to divide people. (2017, 26)

During her research at a similarly indigeneous, low income middle school in Guatemala, Rubin (2016) found that the teachers were unhappy with how the national curriculum was avoiding the topic of the internal armed conflict. She observes,

The school’s social studies teacher, critiqued the national curriculum for its glaring silence on questions of violence and cultural annihilation. Explaining the purpose of his class, he told his middle school students, ‘We don’t know this [historical and

contemporary atrocities committed against Guatemala's Indigenous population], because they don't explain it, they don't tell it. We are here, we come to form ourselves bit by bit, and this is what this course is about.' (2016)

So, historical memory can be used to conceal violence or to give a voice to the victims. Either way, it is clear that schools play an important role in this process. A social studies curriculum can either further liberation from oppressive power structures or hinder it. Instead of telling students what they should think about history, IBNA encourages their students to discuss lived experiences with other community members in Copal AA.

Thus, the use of historical memory in conjunction with liberatory education is meant to combat these means of silencing marginalized groups. IBNA refuses to give in to the state's version of events and encourages students to explore their community's truth through family interviews, community archives, and collective remembering. Instead, problem-posing education makes knowledge more accessible for all learners. The theory of education being forced on to students is rejected in favor of creating a collaborative curriculum grounded in the realities of that community. Critical consciousness urges teachers and students to realize the oppressive power structures holding them back and urges them to liberate themselves. A democratic student-teacher relationship fosters a sense of collaboration. The horrific events of the CA led to the creation of Copal AA and this is something that is never forgotten in their community.

Methodology

This thesis is informed by my personal experiences while visiting Copal AA and interviews conducted online after my visit. I am a female, White, university student from the United States who speaks Spanish as a second language. It is important to note that these

identities shape the interpretations that I have developed here in this thesis, and that these interpretations are partial, incomplete renderings from my perspective. Our delegation from Appalachian State was invited to visit Copal AA during the first week of March 2020. We were joined in the community by a former human rights *acompanante* who lived in Copal AA when it was first formed. She maintains consistent contact with members of Copal AA and returns at least once a year.

During our time in Copal AA, I collected field notes in a journal. These included our activities each day, what was said during the community meetings we attended, excerpts from conversations I had with community members, and drawings of objects I observed in the community. I took notes in both English and Spanish. These notes are supplemented by photographs and videos taken in Copal AA, with the permission of community members, as well as the official delegation report produced by our class collectively. Through these methods of participation, my intention was to gain a deeper understanding of how Copal AA functions on a daily basis, the current problems facing the community, and the values that they have established for themselves.

The majority of my observations took place at IBNA, which is an *escuela secundaria*. This is equivalent to what we refer to as middle school in the United States public school system. The student body consists of around 75 students from ages 11 to 13, although some students may be up to 19. Many students put their education on hold due to lack of finances or familial obligations. Many of the teachers I spoke with were forced to abandon their education because of the CA, but they continued their education while in refuge in Mexico and when they returned to Guatemala. While many students come from Copal AA, it is not uncommon for approximately half of the students to come from surrounding areas along the Rio Chixoy. The curriculum covers

a wide range of topics including: Mayan history, climate change, the indigenous language Q'eqchi', English, Spanish, theater, music, art, science, and mathematics.

Additionally, I conducted a series of interviews with community members. After obtaining approval from the International Research Board, I sent a letter to Copal AA (Appendix A) asking if they would be willing to participate in this project. This letter was received by the director of IBNA, then shared with the rest of the community. I provided examples of questions and themes I would ask about, along with the types of community members I would ideally get to speak with (teachers at IBNA, parents of students, etc.). I created a list of questions for the interviews based on information I already had about Copal AA and IBNA, then consulted existing scholarship surrounding the topics of liberatory education and recent Guatemalan history. These interviews included questions such as “What is your role at IBNA?”, “How have the goals of IBNA changed overtime?”, and “How is the CA discussed in the classrooms at IBNA?” were conducted with video and sound recording via Zoom. Each conversation lasted about an hour, with two participants per session. These conversations took place in Spanish, which was the second language for the interviewers and many of the interview participants. I completed three interviews over the course of two weeks. The members of Copal AA were compensated for their time and their use of cellphone data. Interview protocol in English and Spanish can be seen in Appendix B and Appendix C.

While I was able to gain valuable insight into IBNA’s approaches to education through our discussions, these interviews posed several challenges to interpretation. Both myself and many of the interview participants spoke Spanish as a second language. Personally, this required me to prepare my words beforehand and made it difficult to immediately understand everything that was said or to engage with topics of discussion that I had not prepared for. However, with a

transcription service, I was able to look at the interview transcripts as many times as I needed in order to understand what was being said in a literal sense. Although, there were certainly several words or phrases that I could not determine the exact meaning of which may have been due to regional or informal dialects which I have not discussed in my college Spanish classes. Overall, I had insightful conversations with the IBNA teachers, but it is important to note that the discussions were conducted in a secondary language for myself and the participants. Thus, everything may not have been communicated or understood perfectly. The portions of the interviews I have included in this thesis have been edited only minimally for length and clarity. I have chosen to change as little as possible in order to preserve the true nature of the conversations and to not favor an academic tone of speech over a casual discussion.

In my interpretations, I have chosen to use the Spanish words that were said to me instead of translating them. This was an intentional choice because American English tends to be a dominating language in academia. Unfortunately, Spanish is also a language of the colonizing nations. However, I was unable to speak with the interview participants in the indigneous languages of Q'eqchi', Mam, or Q'anjob'al. I acknowledge that this thesis still utilizes a language which was used as a weapon during the colonization of Latin America and which is still used to stigmatize populations who speak an indigenous language. I chose to use Spanish instead of English to combat some of the status quo of English as the sole language of academic credibility. To accomodate monolingual English readers, I have included translations of interview excerpts used in the thesis directly following the Spanish excerpts.

Additionally, Zoom added another layer to our conversations. Due to technical difficulties on both ends, there were sometimes pauses, lags, or glitches in our speech. There was also a lack of social cues because of the virtual nature of these conversations. Often, I would interrupt

someone who was not done speaking because of the timing difference in our videos. Of course, with the COVID-19 pandemic, it was impossible to travel back to Copal AA. Thankfully, I was able to visit the community beforehand, so I had some familiarity with the interview participants before speaking to them via Zoom. The interview participants willingly volunteered their time to talk with me. I hoped to speak with teachers, alumni, and current parents of students, but ultimately the community decided who they wanted me to talk to. Below I provide a brief portrait of the interview participants.

The first participant was Cristela, a Quiche and Kanjobal woman who has been working at IBNA for the past three years. She received her degree in multicultural and bilingual education from a university in Ixcan. Currently, Cristela works as a teacher of social sciences, art, theater, Spanish, and dance. When asked about her personal experience with education, she responded,

“Para mí la educación representa más allá de lo que es, un título, de lo que es un un papel. Creo que la educación es en lo que uno va adquiriendo, va aprendiendo durante el proceso que uno tiene su existencia en este planeta, verdad?”

For me education represents more than what it is, a degree, more than a paper. I believe that education is what one is acquiring, what one is learning during the process, one's existence on this planet, right?

The second participant was Ricardo, a teacher of mathematics, technology, guitar, and marimba at IBNA who graduated with a teaching degree from a private university in San Juan Chamelco. When asked about his role at the Instituto, Ricardo replied,

“Si el rol de nosotros como docentes, en mi caso, pues considero que el rol a nivel general es guiar a los estudiantes, apoyarlos para que se haga realidad el sueño de cada uno de ellos.”

Yes, our role as teachers, in my case, so I consider the role on a general level is to guide the students, to support them so that they can make each of their dreams come true

Next, I spoke with Gabriela and Laura. Gabriella is an alumna of Copal AA who received a scholarship from the United States to get her teaching degree. She is currently continuing her university education and teaches the social sciences at IBNA. On the topic of indigeneous Mayan identity in the school she said,

“En primer lugar sería la identidad por para que no se pierda la cultura, para que no se pierda todas esas prácticas. E Que el que el pueblo maya ha venido viviendo, verdad?”

In the first place, it would be the identity so that the culture is not forgotten, so that these practices are not forgotten. That the Mayan people have been living, right?

Laura attended primary school in Copal AA, but the *Instituto* had not been created by the time she was ready to continue her education. Our translator and guide, Heather, was one of Laura’s teachers at IBNA when it was founded three years later. Later, Laura received her teaching degree from a university in Ixchán. When Laura attended primary school in Copal AA, many of the teachers came from outside of the community. Thus, they did not share the community’s concern for preserving lived experiences from the CA. On her history classes prior to IBNA she describes,

“Pero en ese tiempo donde cuando yo estudié la primaria nunca nos hablaron de historia, sólo nos hablaban más en ciencias sociales, nunca nos hablaban de Estados Unidos, nos hablaban de España, nos hablaban de Canadá, nos hablaban de otros países que nada que ver con lo que está viviendo en nuestro país, verdad?”

But in this time when I was in primary school, no one talked about history, we only talked about social sciences, we never talked about the United States, we talked about Spain, we talked about Canada, we talked about other countries, nothing to do with what we are living in our country, right?

The following week, Mateo set aside time to talk with me, along with a former director of IBNA, Arturo. Mateo is a part of the Q’eck’i’ ethnic group and has lived in Copal AA for all of his life. Like Laura, his education was put on hold after primary school because IBNA had yet to be built. He received his degree in intercultural bilingual middle education at a university in San Juan Chamelco. After returning to Copal AA, he became the director of IBNA and has remained in this post for 12 years. On the lack of disaster relief after the hurricanes which struck Guatemala he explained,

“No, no, no, no, no le interesa nada entonces [el gobierno] . Pero bueno, gracias a ello también a muchas organizaciones no gubernamentales, pues están tratando de como de ir apoyando llevar algunos víveres a algunas comunidades muy afectadas y pues bueno.”

No, no, no, no, they’re not interested [the government]. But well, thanks to many non-governmental organizations, they are trying to support some very affected communities with provisions

Finally, I spoke with Arturo, the former director of IBNA. He was a teenager during the CA. He later received his teaching degree, along with a psychology degree. He studied popular education in-depth at the Santiago Institute in Guatemala City. On the topic of the significance of IBNA within the larger community he told us,

“Estamos tomando en cuenta porque para nosotros en la comunidad, la educación es la base de un desarrollo, es la base de un cambio. Porque si no hay y no tenemos educación, pues no podemos continuar con una vida así como se quiere en esta nueva etapa. Verdad?” (December 2020 interview)

We are keeping it in mind for those in our community, education is the base of development, it is the base of change. Because if there is none and we don't have education, we can not continue with life in this new stage that we want, right?

Education in Copal AA

This section will explore my interpretations of what I observed in Copal AA and what I learned during my interviews. These will be interwoven with Freirian components of liberatory education such as praxis and democratic student-teacher relationships. While I have separated my findings by theme, it is crucial to mention that these topics are all interconnected. It is impossible to discern where one component of liberatory education starts and where it ends. Popular education based on a community's knowledge can promote critical consciousness, just as engagement in the world can lead to greater critical consciousness. The organization of the information below is not meant to suggest that each observation is an example of only one component of liberatory education, but rather represents one manner of categorizing my findings.

One of the key features of popular education is creating a curriculum based on a community's knowledge and the realities of their situation. Freire (1993) wrote that “the starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people” (76). This is most evident in the ways that IBNA teaches about the CA. While the national curriculum does not include much about the CA, IBNA refuses to forget these events and instead encourages their students to learn about what happened during these violent years.

The importance of recalling recent history was clear from the first classroom that we entered. As we filed into the room, I found myself taking a second look at one of the projects on the walls. What appeared to be journal entries and landscape drawings were actually something else: family histories of CA. The students at IBNA talked with their families about their lived experiences during the CA. I noticed colorful drawings depicting helicopters, guns, soldiers, and violent deaths. Several of the teachers confirmed this method of teaching during the interviews. Ricardo, the mathematics teacher, shared,

“La manera también en que se ha trabajado es pedir a los estudiantes que que pregunten a sus padres cómo fue que ellos vivieron el conflicto armado y ellos lo escriben ya como una historia. El testimonio de cada familia de ellos, verdad?” (December 2020 interview)

Also, the way that we work is to ask the students to ask their parents how it was when they lived through the CA and that they write it like a history. The testimony of each of their families, right?

Gabriela, who was a student at IBNA, now teaches social sciences there. Her parents survived the CA, brought the family back from Mexico, and settled in Copal AA. Gabriela describes the first school assignment she was given as a child regarding her family's history. She recalls,

“Entonces nosotros los íbamos a hacer investigaciones y a notábamos ahí. Y entonces ya llegando a la escuela los socializamos y compartí, digamos, porque he diferente. Los padres tienen diferentes historias. Igual en el instituto, en el IBNA, lo mismo nos hacían, los mandaban a hacer investigaciones, eh? A veces grabábamos si podíamos o a notábamos simplemente en el cuaderno.”

Then we did investigations and wrote them down. Then we arrived at school, we socialized, and shared, we said, why are they different. The parents have different stories. It's the same at IBNA, we do the same thing, we send them [the students] to do an investigation, right? Sometimes we record them if we can, or we simply write them in a notebook.

The responses I received from other teachers at IBNA confirmed the importance of including the CA in the curriculum. When the teachers created the curriculum at IBNA, there was an emphasis on using knowledge from people who had lived through the internal armed conflict. The social studies teacher, Cristela, explained,

“Y también con el apoyo de algunos líderes de la comunidad que sufrieron fuertemente el conflicto armado y que de ahí pues viene este pensum y que ahora nosotros como como jóvenes profesionales, pues darle vida a este pénsum, verdad?”

And also with the support of some of the leaders in the community that suffered greatly during the CA and that's where the curriculum comes from and now we are the young professionals, so that it gives life to this curriculum, right?

In addition to learning about the CA from textbooks and other written resources, IBNA encourages their students to interview family members and friends about their experiences. The community's history of living through the CA is the guiding force for their curriculum, which is a prime example of popular education. The national curriculum does not have a monopoly as a source of knowledge. Instead, IBNA steers their students towards localized knowledge.

Another key feature of the education in Copal AA is the use of art, dance, and music to make space for other sources of knowledge and modes of expression. Community-based knowledge helps ground the curriculum in the community's experiences but using art makes the material easier to engage with and allows the students to express themselves. For example, Cristela teaches art and dance, along with social science. She often utilizes art, music, and theater to allow students to express what they have learned about Guatemalan history from their parents or from other members of Copal AA. She explains,

“Es otra actividad, es otra forma de dar el tema. E otro recurso que utilizamos es son las obras de teatro. Aprovechamos nuestra voz, nuestro talento e acompañado de los chinchín, de la marimba, de la música y ensayamos nuestra obra de teatro para los alumnos que les cuesta un poquito expresarse, pero pueden danzar”

It is another activity, another way to give the theme. And another resource that we use are plays. We take advantage of our voice, our talent, and accompanied by the chinchin, the

marimba, the music, and we teach our play for the students that have trouble expressing themselves, they can dance.

Praxis is an activity or project which is led by a cycle of reflection and action. The activities at IBNA are chosen intentionally and not meant to simply give information to the students. Instead, they are carefully picked and formed based on the current realities of life in Copal AA. Students are given more freedom to explore topics based on dynamic, interactive projects which allow them to contribute to the well-being of their community.

Although Mateo described the hurricanes in Copal AA, almost every other teacher at IBNA I spoke with mentioned caring for the Earth without prompting. This is something they incorporate into their classrooms. They talk about not only environmental conservation, but also the consequences of environmental destruction. Cristela mentioned their consciousness of the land and the threat of government-sponsored development projects,

“También hablamos sobre las consecuencias que traen los megaproyectos. El cambio climático siempre lo enfocamos porque son son injusticias que se ha dado aquí en nuestro territorio, porque los recursos naturales han sido, han sido y están siendo explotados de una manera este irracional de los empresarios, verdad? Y eso es lo que nosotros damos mucho a conocer con los estudiantes”

Also, we talk about the consequences that the megaprojects bring. We always focus on climate change because they are injustices that have been given here in our territory, because the natural resources they have been and they are being exploited in an irrational way by the companies, right? And that is what we make known to the students.

After arriving at IBNA, we were immediately joined into this immense care for the land. Every Wednesday, the teachers and students devote 4 hours to tending the community garden. The students at IBNA grow pineapples, onions, bananas, and cardamom. These plants are cared for without any chemical. Eventually they are sold at the Copal AA farmer's market, and contribute to the upkeep of IBNA. This introduces the students to sustainable methods of farming, which contrasts with the destruction they have seen in other parts of the country by crops planted by multinational corporations, such as the African palm plant, and allows them to contribute to the school's finances.

Other non-traditional methods of learning, such as theater and the arts are used to unpack more recent events or issues in the community and not just for the students. During our delegation's visit, the students of IBNA displayed cultural presentations that they had prepared. The performance began with the lighting of a Copal incense and ceremonious candles. This was followed by songs on the marimba, traditional Mayan dances, and a powerful play written by the students. In a short performance, the IBNA students covered topics such as environmental destruction, global capitalism, and the threat that both of these concepts face to the indigenous communities of Guatemala. Cristela expanded on her use of theater at IBNA to say that it is a more practical activity for the students. She explained,

“Hasta incluso a veces hasta hacemos ya actividades más prácticas, como por ejemplo eh. Ensayar una obra de teatro sobre un empresario y la población indígena, verdad? Es. Es ahí donde los otros ya muy nos enfocamos más verdad? O ya e. Montar una escena. Una. Una escena de teatro sobre la. Qué consecuencias traen las. Las hidroeléctricas, por ejemplo. Y ya pondría este presentarlo ante la comunidad se halla.”

Sometimes we include more practical activities, for example, rehearse a play about a company and the indigenous population, right? This is what we focus on the most, right? Or stage a scene, a theater scene about the consequences that the hydroelectrics bring, for example. And we can present this before the community.

Thus, IBNA employs more real-world projects in their classrooms to encourage the students to explore current political, social, and economic power structures which are biased against them as an impoverished, indigenous population. Freirian ideas surrounding praxis encourage teachers and students to reflect and turn their critical thinking into actions. This becomes a continuous cycle of being aware of the realities of your community and determining how you can be helpful to its collective well-being.

An additional element in liberatory education is a democratic student-teacher relationship. IBNA clearly rejects the traditional authoritarian role of a teacher and the passive role of the student. As soon as I stepped into the classroom, I noticed something unlike the classrooms I had sat in myself: the desks were not in rows, but instead formed an open circle around the room. This was a small detail which highlighted IBNA's commitment to combat the sense of the teacher being the knowledge-giver and the students being the knowledge-receivers. The classroom seemed less authoritarian this way, more balanced.

The following excerpt from an interview with Ricardo reveals the sense of more collective identity and egalitarianism at IBNA. When asked, "What is your role at IBNA?" , he responded,

“Si el rol de de nosotros como docentes, en mi caso, pues considero que el rol a nivel general es guiar a los estudiantes, apoyarlos para que se haga realidad el sueño de cada uno de ellos.”

Yes, our role as teachers, in my case, so I consider the role on a general level is to guide the students, to support them so that they can make each of their dreams come true

In this sentence two important ideas should be noted. First, the interview question I posed was directed at Ricardo specifically as an individual. Yet, he replied with the plural pronoun, “we”. I noticed this a few times in my interviews and it hints at IBNA’s commitment to a less authoritarian structure for their teachers and the strong sense of community. Also, Ricardo describes his role as “guiding” and “supporting” the students. This perception of a teacher’s role contradicts the banking method of education. This description makes the teacher seem much more like a mediator, as Freire suggested, as opposed to an authority figure (Freire, 1993).

The teachers of IBNA have positioned themselves to guide students, as opposed to being a monopolizer of knowledge. This democratic student-teacher relationship, combined with the practice of critical consciousness and praxis demonstrates that IBNA is a prime example of liberatory education. This type of education becomes increasingly necessary as nations become divided on knowledge, which can lead to dangerous, even deadly consequences.

A final component I noticed in Copal AA is that the buildings are covered with images of the genocide of the Mayan population. The following mural is painted on the side of one of the school office buildings. The image depicts an example of the violence during the CA, including the physical abuse and murder of women and children. The importance of history is clear; in this instance, it is engrained in the structure of IBNA. It is impossible to walk down the main path of

Copal AA without seeing a reminder of the violence of the CA. These ever-present images serve as another way to raise critical consciousness and ensure that Guatemalan history is woven into this community's identity.



Mural depicting violence of the CA, painted on the side of an office at IBNA (Photo by Jeff Goodman, 2020)

Liberatory education practices utilized at IBNA foster opportunities to question past, present, and future events in order to raise their students' awareness of the current realities in the community of Copal AA. These daily events are all affected by the internal armed conflict from 1962 to 1996. Just as indigenous populations were disproportionately affected by this violence, the indigenous populations of Guatemala are still plagued by poverty, lack of resources, and neglect by the state government. Working towards critical consciousness at IBNA allows the students to become aware of what happened during the armed conflict, while questioning how these events influence the current realities in Copal AA.

Las pulmones de la comunidad



My first morning in Copal AA, the roosters woke me up punctually at 5:30, and there was no hitting snooze on a rooster. Each morning we were welcomed into a new home for 3 meals that day. Most families were content to chat with us, but others were too busy to mind our presence. We were served a warm bowl of broth, filled with herbs that reminded me of dandelions. And of course, corn tortillas. More than you could ever ask for and freshly kneaded by your host mother.

Our first morning in Copal AA was spent at the Instituto Basico Nuevo Amanecer (IBNA). The rainy season had been unusually long this year, so our boots were caked in fresh mud when we arrived at the entrance. Our first task of the day was in the community garden. The students at IBNA grow pineapples, onions, bananas, and cardamom. These plants are cared for without any chemicals and are eventually sold at the Copal AA farmer's market. Alongside a few students, I dug small holes in the ground to plant new seeds and carefully extracted harmful

weeds from beside the crops. I held a scoop of dirt in my hands; it was warm, damp, rich, and black as midnight on a moonless night. I watched in awe as a group of 12 year-olds wielded machetes with expert hands. With one swift motion, they chopped off dead branches and avoided the healthy ones by inches. Another group scoured the area for branches and built protective structures around the pepper seeds. One boy saw me observing the banana trees and handed me a machete. I swung it pathetically at a branch which earned a few laughs. The students motioned for me to use more force, to hit the branches harder. After a few futile attempts, I relinquished the tool back to the experts.

Our first meeting in Copal AA took place in the community kitchen later that afternoon. Gabriella, the mayor of the town, took her place at a bench in the front of the room, wearing a top woven with every imaginable color. She had been a founding member of the community who joined the guerilla fighters at age 15. Since then, Gabriella had participated in physically constructing the town, served as the president of the COCODE, and raised three children all on her own. She did not speak much, yet commanded the attention of the room. COCODE is the governing body which monitors the development and bienestar or well-being in Copal AA. Each member introduced themselves to us with their name and which sector they represented. COCODE. The middle school. The women's committee. The elder's committee. Ramon, a member of the elder's committee, spoke on the history of Guatemala and the "scorched Earth" policy which destroyed the Ixchan region. In 1996, the members of Copal AA had to occupy urban government offices in order to be given the chance to purchase their land. Now, they take care of it with the understanding that this piece of Earth is not just theirs, but belongs to previous and future generations as well. Ramon described their plot as "the lungs of the community". Something that is living, breathing, providing.

As we were handed freshly cut coconuts, other COCODE members spoke on the community rules of Copal AA. The association is made up of 86 members, who are democratically elected by every member of Copal AA. Their main crops, corn, beans, rice, coffee, and cardamom are never treated with pesticides. The sale of processed foods and alcohol are prohibited. Throughout this discussion, I couldn't help but notice the sense of collectivity. This is something we had discussed about Copal AA, but to see it in practice was something different. There were no individual needs, there were necesidades de la comunidad. There was no talk of "I did this", instead it was decidimos.

Later that night, B and I returned to the house to find our host father, R, in the kitchen. After B had decided to turn in for the night, R and I sat in the kitchen as the day faded into night. He rose from the table for a moment while I sat eagerly in my seat. He returned with a large book, which I first mistook for a Bible. R gently placed the thick paperback in front of me and I was hesitant to touch it, for fear that I might damage it in any way. Las Masacres en la Selva. A comprehensive tale of the most horrific years of the Conflicto Armado in the Ixchan region of Guatemala. The spine was well-worn; parts of the black and red cover had faded. With a nod from R, I picked the book up and held it in my hands. Without hesitation, he began recounting the history of Guatemala beginning in the 1940's. The American United Fruit Company bought up the majority of the land and resources in the country, leaving none left to the average Guatemalan. R pointed out the importance of discussing this history with the students at IBNA. The most important questions, he mentioned, were "¿Porque el genocidio? Que paso en el genocidio? ¿Qué son los acuerdos de paz?". R finished his account of history and turned to the present obstacles in Copal AA's way. Currently, the environment around Copal AA is suffering from large plantations of African Palm plants, used to produce the incredibly popular

commodity, palm oil. These plantations are created by corporations without consultation from the surrounding communities. The African Palm does not collaborate well with the native vegetation and takes a majority of the water. Copal AA has been fighting against international companies for decades to prevent the extraction of natural resources. “La lucha sigue,” said R, “pero el color cambia”. Our conversation turned to our delegation visiting Copal AA. R told me that the surrounding communities don’t understand why they’re inviting gringos to visit. He confessed that he hopes our visit will grow into something more, that we can spread the word of Copal AA to todo el mundo. He gestured to the story in my hands, “You could write a book like this to tell our story.”



A quiet morning on the Rio Chixoy, which is threatened by an international development project (Photo by author)

Las voces de los estudiantes

The following morning, I was greeted by a hummingbird as I brushed my teeth (the first one I had seen in real life). B and I followed the winding path to the salon, a large outdoor

amphitheater designed and built by Copaalenses. This structure was used for markets, performances, movie showings, community meetings, and soccer games.

Today, the students of IBNA would be displaying cultural presentations that they had prepared. The performance began with the lighting of a Copal incense and ceremonious candles. This was followed by songs on the marimba, traditional Mayan dances, and a powerful play written by the students. In a short performance, the IBNA students covered topics such as environmental destruction, global capitalism, and the threat that both of these concepts face to the indigenous communities of Guatemala.

As the sun travelled across the sky, we made our way down to the Rio Chixoy where everyone piled into una lancha, a narrow type of canoe that could nimbly cut through the waves. Lush plants surrounded us as we splashed downstream to the Xalala Dam. Members of the organization ACODET led our excursion. This is a group of leaders from communities in and surrounding Copal AA who have been fighting this megaproyecto for decades. This dam would flood some communities and dry up the river for others, thus displacing hundreds of families. The Guatemalan government has been threatening to start this project for years, but the Conflicto Armado placed it on hold. When a U.S.-based company recently decided to take up the megaproyecto to generate electricity for Mexico, it became an emergency once again. ACODET works to create dialogue within the communities along the Rio Chixoy and create a message of solidarity against this development. “We are fortunate that no one has been arrested yet,” explained one of the ACODET leaders as he looked over the peaceful body of water. There is a long and violent history of indigenous leaders advocating for themselves. Once the CA ended, the governmental discrimination did not end. Like my host father told me, “La lucha sigue, pero el color cambia.”

I shakily stepped out of la lancha and into the cool water. The sensation was refreshing after days of baking in the sun and weeks spent in the snow of Boone. I washed myself off and let my thoughts wander. “We [e.g. Americans, Western industrial societies] are the ones who create the problems of climate change, but we do not bear the burden. Why are we asking the people of Copal AA how to solve this crisis when we are the ones who created it?”. I had spent days collecting story after story, but still had no idea how to share them.



*Soccer is popular in Copal AA. Instead of having a mascot, the community team is called “Copal AA
Protect Nature”*

Implications

This thesis challenged me to question my own experiences with education. As a student of the United States public school system, I am accustomed to an authoritarian teacher who creates the curriculum for the students to receive. It is impossible to imagine my biology teacher handing me a machete to tend to a banana tree, or my civics teacher outlining the recent atrocities committed by the U.S. government, or my mathematics teacher encouraging me to play the marimba in the hallways. After a week spent in Copal AA, I couldn't help but question the education that I had experienced in the United States public school system. I never challenged whether my class material was relevant to my community. I did not discuss current events and their historical causes. I never considered my education as a tool for community organizing and collective action. However, after my visit to Copal AA, I am interrogating the structures of power of which I am a part, and coming to understand critical consciousness from my own experience and perspective. In this concluding section, I want to bring attention to reiterate the importance of liberatory education practices in Copal AA and describe the relevance of these practices on a global scale.

However, in Copal AA, the practices of liberatory education extend outside of IBNA. Currently, the community is facing problems which are threatening their resources and their land. One of these is an international development project, the Xalalá Dam, which has been endangering the community since the early 2000s. The Network in Solidarity with Guatemala predicts that if this *megaproyecto* were to be completed, it would displace around 10,000 indigneous Mayan people in communities along the Rio Chixoy (NISGUA, 2014). The topic of the Xalalá Dam and alternative methods of development are frequently discussed in the classrooms and members of the Association of Communities for Development and the Defense

of Land and Natural Resources (ACODET) often present at the school to get students involved in the current issues of the community.

Currently, Copal AA is hard at work constructing a small-scale hydroelectric turbine system which could generate electricity in a more reliable manner than the few solar panels they have now. So, the community is not anti-development, but prefers to be more intentional and environmentally-conscious in their projects. With this turbine system, the idea of praxis transcends the classroom and extends into the greater community.

In closing, it is critical to point out the stark similarities between Guatemala and the United States regarding historical memory and state curricula. In January of 2021, the Trump administration released the 1776 Report, which was meant to replace current narratives on American history. The Report's written objective is to "enable a rising generation to understand the history and principles of the founding of the United States in 1776 and to strive to form a more perfect Union" (Arnn et. al, 2021). However, this publication was highly criticized for white-washing history and suggesting that history only became notable after 1776. This ignores the conquest, violence, and slavery which contributed to the founding of the United States. The introduction states,

Of course, neither America nor any other nation has perfectly lived up to the universal truths of equality, liberty, justice, and government by consent. But no nation before America ever dared state those truths as the formal basis for its politics, and none has strived harder, or done more, to achieve them (Arnn et. al, 2021).

After examining various reports on Guatemalan history, it becomes clear that historical accounts can serve to maintain existing power structures and erase the blame for violent

perpetrators. In a time when projects such as the 1776 Report exist, it becomes even more imperative to question state historical narratives and ask who they might benefit. It becomes imperative to give a platform to lived experiences and historical memory as valuable sources of knowledge. In Copal AA La Esperanza, I observed education used as a tool for questioning state historical narratives, along with what that means for the future. I discovered the success of community collaboration, which includes contributing without the expectation of a reward. I noticed the care given to the land, even as the effects of global climate change fought back. I saw what it meant to have your voice silenced, but continuing the fight for your rights anyway. I conclude with my field notes from leaving Guatemala and returning to the United States.

“Contar nuestra historia”

On our final morning in Copal AA, B and I were hosted by a member of the women’s organization for our daily meals. We faced the day with a belly full of eggs and--you guessed it--corn tortillas. Before the sun could get too high in the sky, we headed off to walk the path of las turbinas, which had been created and designed entirely by members of Copal AA. This project would bring electricity to the community and be the opposite of the Xalala dam in every conceivable way. The turbines had been a collective effort, in which people would volunteer their time and funds to create something to serve the greater good. The turbines would collect energy from the Copal AA river and provide electricity to the community when the solar energy was not sufficient.

The mayor of the town, Gabriella, led us on a walking tour of the construction project and I was in shock. The canal they had built was a mile long, five feet deep, constructed entirely of concrete, and running through the middle of the jungle. Men and women had volunteered their time to hike into the forest with bags of concrete during their free time.

The meeting I was most eager for had finally come--the women's committee meeting. Our small group gathered once again in the salon where the female leaders of the community sat close together on the amphitheater's benches. With their woven huipiles they created a sea of vibrant colors. After a brief welcome, the women took turns answering our questions and explaining the history of Mama Maquín, the indigenous women's rights organization. This group started in Mexico, during the years of refuge from the genocide, long before Copal AA existed. One of the largest issues they deal with is access to education. IBNA has made amazing strides towards their goals, but there is still work to be done. Unfortunately, the closest higher education is in Coban, three hours away. So, if a student in Copal AA wants to continue on to high school, they must cover the cost of the school, transportation, meals, and housing. As a cool breeze blew through the salon, the women concluded their stories and set up their weaving products for us to purchase. In the blink of an eye, clotheslines were hung, tables set up, and handmade pieces covered every available inch within the covered amphitheater. Bags of every conceivable size, blankets, bracelets, and scarves of infinite colors and patterns overwhelmed the space, alongside blocks of cardamom chocolate. These weavings are a source of income for each family and the skills are often passed down each generation.

After a quick dip in the river, our group's journey came full circle, with one last meeting in the community kitchen. Thoughtful "thank you"s and promises of solidaridad were exchanged from our delegation and from community leaders. Part of the cost for each student participant was set aside as a gift for Copal AA. What struck me about this was that Gabriella publicly announced that these funds had been received. Each COCODE member acknowledged these finances. After business was done, the marimba was wheeled in and the table was flooded with

fresh fruit, tamales, and tortillas. Soft music notes filled the room and spilled out the windows as the sun set.

After departing Copal AA, our bumpy bus ride deposited us back in Coban as the sun began to rise. Once we were back in an area with internet connection, we discovered that classes had been cancelled for an extra week. Yay! More spring break! However, when the plane touched down back in Charlotte, I felt like I had been ripped out of a fever dream. What felt like hours ago, I had been shovelling dirt with my fingers, guided by a group of 12 year olds who tend to a garden which feeds their entire community. Now, I couldn't go 10 minutes without being told to wash my hands. A few days ago, I would be greeted with a warm handshake and "bueno bueno" by everyone I passed on the street. Now, I was warned not to go to the grocery store without a pair of plastic gloves. For the past week, I had been welcomed into a new home each day, for three meals of fresh corn tortillas and amicable conversation. Now, I was being advised not to stand within six feet of another human being. While it is obvious the world changed during those mere days we were in the jungle, I can't help but think how my own world changed as well. In those few days, I experienced sorrow, anger, confusion, curiosity, admiration, and hope. I left Copal AA with a heart both lifted by the honor of being welcomed into this community and weighted by the responsibility of forever being joined in their struggle. I still ponder what I can do to share the story of Copal AA, as I was called on to do by the leaders of this community.

So, I have become forever woven into the story of this indigenous Guatemalan community. It made sense to use this thesis as a platform to share the words and work of the members of Copal AA.

Appendix A: Copal AA Project Proposal Letter:

Queridos amigos y queridas amigas,

Espero que todo esté bien en la comunidad de Copal AA La Esperanza, y que estén sanos y prósperos. Nuestros pensamientos están con la gente de Copal AA mientras todos tratamos de hacerlo a través de estos tiempos confusos. Mi nombre es Piper Strzelecki. Soy estudiante en mi último año de universidad en los Estados Unidos. En marzo de este año, visité Copal AA como parte de una delegación con el ex acompañante Goyo, Elenita, y un grupo de estudiantes de Carolina del Norte. Durante nuestra estadía breve, aprendimos mucho sobre cómo el IBNA se centra en la conservación del medio ambiente, la defensa de la mujer y el derecho a la educación. Observé las salas de clase utilizadas como una herramienta para iluminar la verdad sobre el pasado, junto con lo que eso significa para el futuro.

Les escribo para pedir su ayuda con una investigación que estoy llevando. Estoy empezando la investigación para mi tesis y estoy explorando la relación entre la educación, la justicia social, y la memoria histórica. Exploraré algunas preguntas como: ¿Cómo es la educación en las comunidades que han sufrido la violencia estatal? ¿Cómo influye la educación en la identidad? ¿Cómo se puede promover la justicia social a través de la educación? Algunas de mis preguntas están inspiradas por que observé en el IBNA y por las discusiones que tuve con los miembros de la comunidad. Me gustaría hablar con ustedes sobre las escuelas en Copal AA. También tengo curiosidad por sus opiniones sobre la promoción de la justicia social y la importancia de la memoria histórica. Cualquier cosa que estén dispuestos a compartir sería útil. Yo sé que las experiencias de Copal AA serán inspiradores a otros miembros de mi universidad y a través del país.

Espero tener conversaciones con maestros, padres de estudiantes y activistas de justicia social en la comunidad. Me gustaría tener estas conversaciones ya sea por teléfono o en una videollamada con aproximadamente 6 a 8 miembros de la comunidad, ya sea individualmente o en parejas. Cada conversación será de unos 30 a 45 minutos. He recibido una beca de mi universidad, así que estoy feliz de cubrir el costo de cualquier llamada telefónica o videollamada y de compensarlos por su tiempo.

Me inspiré enormemente por Copal AA y la determinación de luchar por los derechos de los pueblos indígenas en Guatemala, por el medio ambiente y por el acceso igualitario a la educación. Les agradezco que me hayan invitado a su comunidad y sinceramente espero volver un día pronto. Espero que la comunidad vea valor en este proyecto, y espero trabajar con ustedes para poder compartir mejor la historia de Copal AA.

En solidaridad,
Piper



Appendix B: Interview Protocol (English):

Hello! How are you? I visited Copal AA in the first week of March with a delegation from Appalachian State University. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. This should take about 30-45 minutes. I hope to learn more about the education in Copal AA, the social justice issues important to the community, and how the Conflict Armado has shaped the way Guatemalan students learn. You do not have to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable responding to and you will remain anonymous in your answers. My hope is to share the story of Copal AA with my classmates, professors, and other scholars in my community. I have been inspired by what I saw at IBNA; I know others will be too. Thank you so much for your time and for your participation.

Tell me about yourself and your family

- Ethnicity
- Connection to the school
- Role in the community
- Personal experience with education

What are the current goals of IBNA? Have they changed since the school started?

- New issues arising in the community
- New laws affecting indigenous communities

What social justice issues are focused on in the classroom?

- Women's rights
- Indigenous identity
- Environmental conservation

What does the state curriculum say about CA?

- At what grade is it introduced and how does it change over time?
- Local additions/deletions
- Who?

What is the official relationship between the state and IBNA?

- Funding
- Curriculum
- Attempts to create obstacles/challenges

How does Copal AA's history & the CA influence the curriculum at IBNA?

- What are some ways that the Armed Conflict is taught/discussed in the classrooms? How is it taught outside of the classrooms?
- What do the students normally know about the Armed Conflict before entering the school?
- Told by parents, grandparents, friends, etc.
- Part of community history
- Official documents? (REMHI?)
- Artwork, plays, etc.

Do strong emotions ever influence the classroom?

- Strong emotions help/hinder social justice issues?

Appendix C: Interview Protocol (Spanish):

Entrevista-FINAL

Hola, buen día. ¿Cómo estás? Soy Piper, visite Copal AA en la primera semana de marzo con la delegación de Appalachian State University. Gracias por aceptar participar en esta entrevista. Este debe durar treinta a cuarenta y cinco minutos. Espero aprender más sobre la educación en Copal AA, la cuestiones de la justicia social que son importantes en la comunidad, y como el Conflicto Armado ha formado la manera que aprendan los estudiantes guatemaltecos. No necesitas contestar si no te sientes cómodo con la pregunta. Sus respuestas serán anónimas. Mi esperanza es compartir la historia de Copal AA con mis compañeros de clase, mis profesores, y otros miembros de mi comunidad. He sido inspirada en que lo vi en Copal AA; yo se que otros serán inspirados también. Gracias por tu tiempo y tu energía.

Para empezar, me puedes decir sobre tu propia educación

- Etnicidad
- Historia de la educación
- Conexión con el IBNA
- Rol en la comunidad

¿Qué son los objetivos del IBNA? ¿Han cambiado desde el comienzo de la escuela?

- Nuevos temas en la comunidad
- Nuevas leyes que han afectado la gente indígena

¿En cuáles cuestiones de la justicia social se enfocan en el IBNA?

- Los derechos de la mujer
- La conservación medio ambiental
- La identidad indígena

¿Qué dice la currícula estadal sobre el Conflicto Armado?

- ¿A qué edad se introduce?

¿Cuáles son algunas de las maneras en que el Conflicto Armado se enseña/discute en las salas de clases? ¿Cómo se enseña fuera de las salas de clases?

- ¿Normalmente, que saben sobre el Conflicto Armado antes de entrar el IBNA los estudiantes?
- ¿Y que saben sobre el Conflicto después de terminar en el IBNA?

Si pudieras enseñar a la próxima generación de Copal AA una cosa, ¿cuál sería?

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